



Altitude Awards

2024 CINEGEAR EXPO



Altitude Awards 2024!



Welcome to the third year of the Altitude Awards!

We're thrilled to celebrate the artistry and craft of cinematographers, gaffers, and camera operators.

The competition was intense, and our judges were truly impressed.



As a special pre-awards show benefit, Band pro hosted an exclusive #HireTheseWomen cocktail party at their Burbank showroom. The #HireTheseWomen Initiative connects our members with individuals who have the ability to hire or recommend them for opportunities such as the ASC mentorship program, independent projects, and studio pipeline programs. Attendees included Altitude Awards participants, judges, vendor partners, and select members of the entertainment industry.

We'll be presenting fantastic prizes that will enrich the winners' toolkits. First, second, and third place winners, along with the fourth place recipient, an Emerging Filmmaker, and ten semi-finalists will have the honor of including this award on their resumes, along with receiving a special badge that will increase their visibility on our CrewList.



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cover photo by: ashlycovington



The Real Deal: 2024 ICDA Award Recipient

Susan Lewis

What lead you to PR for the entertainment industry?

The day after graduating UCLA in Communications Studies, I walked into the office of the only company I knew in the business, Cinema Products. I was hired as a secretary. I worked hard and learned about cameras, lenses, and all the new technology that poured out of that company. No matter which of the many job titles I had, I took pride in knowing the gear. I could thread a camera, balance a Steadicam, and most importantly explain it to others. I worked with the inventors who were transforming the technology and the filmmakers who hungered for it. Regardless of how obscure an item or how remote their location, customers knew they could count on me to get them exactly what they needed to shoot their project. I never became the filmmaker I had intended to be, but landed in a niche that has morphed with the times and stayed with me until today.

Why did you start your own business?

I established Lewis Communications to fill the needs people came to me with, mainly in the areas of professional motion picture, television, and still photography. A designer at heart, I took classes in graphic design, and combined with my explanatory skills we produced ads, brochures, manuals, logos—anything that introduced new tools that would eventually be accepted as standard on set and post.

My clients brought me to trade shows and events, so I had a constant ear to the ground getting unique insights into the industry. By having a tight focus on the production industry, I was able to grow my company's capabilities as the technological times changed from an analog to digital world.



Photo by: Claudia Hoag

What is it you do now?

We create genuine content for websites, articles, blogs, ads, and social media. Folks still need to know the benefits of new equipment, processes, and the nuts and bolts of what they are about to buy or use. People appreciate getting opinions on how things work in actual production from colleagues. So we interview, write, art direct photo shoots, produce videos, and create artwork.

We are connectors — filmmakers with manufacturers, writers with users, creators and makers with orgs like Women in Media. While some are online, we are big believers in in-person connection. Hence, we participate in live happenings like trade shows, screenings, festivals, award shows, etc. and often help our clients put on their own events — small and large. That's where our friendships and personal touch come in.

What is your superpower?

Friendships. When you have been around this long you meet people along the way. And I think that people in our biz are terrific. We're all there to bolster the artists who are responsible for telling the stories of today's culture. Folks that started out when I did are now in respected industry positions — owners of top brands, rental houses, union and organization execs, filmmakers, trade shows, publishers, etc. Practically speaking it makes it easier to get things done when you call on friends. If we recommend a product to a filmmaker, they are usually happy to try it out and give us honest feedback. If a news story suggestion comes from us, the trade press gives it consideration.

Photo by: Ashly Covington

The most empowering element has been the extraordinarily talented people on my team throughout the years. Each has shared our philosophy of going the limit to help clients get new tech to filmmakers. It is always fun. Each has made a contribution to the business — regardless of whether they are with Lewis now or in other positions, we remain great friends.

You've seen so many changes to how we produce film and television. What have been some of the most significant advances you have seen in your career?

At first the change from analog to digital crept in slowly just like the personal computers that took over our desks. As a neophyte I saw news gathering go from 16mm film to ENG. When the camera company I worked for, Cinema Products, saw the writing on the wall, we took action. We showed a filmmaking package with an Ikegami camera surrounded by traditional cine equipment and called it Electronic Cinematography. Their Steadicam came out with a Universal model for either film or video and the unions, which were separated at the time—took notice. Simultaneously advances in editing came along, using VHS tape in individual decks. I was behind the scenes for the first "nonlinear" system, the Ediflex system which was a precursor to more sophisticated systems like Montage and eventually Avid. I was also at the forefront of the LED lighting revolution which I fell into with a team of gaffers who had designed new lower energy draw lights, called Lite Panels. Video cameras are now called "Digital" and today camera brands vie for market share, as film stock seems limited to a chosen few.

Now the field has grown exponentially. With the advent of streaming, there is content needed of all types. Plus as equipment continues to come down in size and new methods of mounting and moving it are devised, we hope that it will kill the stereotype of men doing the heavy lifting. Now if we could just get the strike issues behind us maybe we can get more diverse crews back to set.

Has technology helped level the playing field for women behind the scenes?

I could see early on that strides in digital technology helped women move into the effects and post production world. But I am afraid we are still far away from equality on set. Yes it is better, thanks to the passionate work of a handful of inspirational women who worked their butts off because nothing ever came easy. Now there are more women coming up in the camera department than ever before.

However it is far from equal. After 100 years of father-to-son nepotism there is still a glass ceiling. That's why groups like WiM are so vitally important to push the needle. I always encourage women to learn about technology. Don't give up —it takes hard work and patience. And when you finally make it, give back — please hire other women.

Congratulations

to you Susan, on this well deserved honor!
Thank you for all the years of valuable support
you've given to the Los Angeles Post Production
Group and our community.
We are all better for having had the opportunity
to work with such an industry icon.

*Wishing you much
continued success,*

Wendy and Woody Woodhall & LAPPGs well deserved honor!

LAPPG
Los Angeles Post Production Group

Altitude Awards 24'



Altitude Awards Judges



Deborah M. Pratt

Deborah M. Pratt became the first African American drama and sci-fi TV executive producer when she co-created and wrote 25 and co-wrote another 15 episodes of the iconic TV series **Quantum Leap** for NBC. Deborah is currently an executive producer for the 2022 reboot of the new **Quantum Leap**. She was also the EP and head writer for **Tequila and Bonetti** and co-creator, EP, and showrunner for **The Net**.

Deborah is an award-winning graduate of the AFI Directing Women's Workshop. She made her directorial debut with **Cora Unashamed** for Masterpiece Theatre. Deborah recently directed the well-received finale to season 16 of **Grey's Anatomy**. Ms. Pratt is a four-time Emmy nominee, a Golden Globe nominee, recipient of the Lillian Gish Award and the Golden Block Award, and many film festival awards.

Antonella Carla LoBrutto

was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Armed with a proactive personality, Antonella obtained a Bachelor's degree in Filmmaking and extra specialization in music videos and Commercial Directing. In 2011, at the age of 22, Antonella became one of the youngest crew hires to work in a TV series for The Disney Channel, **Violetta**.

She has worked in the Art Department for companies such as the Disney Channel, Netflix, HBO, Asepxia, Natura cosmetics, Sony Music Latin America, Universal Music Argentina, XBOX Microsoft, and more. She is currently based in Los Angeles, California, working for ARRI INC, leading the video production team, among other responsibilities.



Betsy Pollock



Betsy Pollock is one of the film industry's most experienced hands-on film producers and educators. Betsy Pollock served as Associate Dean of Production at the American Film Institute for 16 years and during that time was responsible for the creation of 84 short films per year. She served as the Chair of the Producing Discipline at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, NC for 3 years. She was the co-producer of the 2004 Academy Award-winning short, **Two Soldiers**. Pollock was the founder and co-chair of the Women in Film PSA Committee and produced or executive produced a number of PSAs that appeared in theaters. She was the co-chair of the WIF Film Finishing Fund for five years with the financial support of Netflix. She has served on the Board of GreenLight Women since 2017, recently as Treasurer of the organization.

Fernando Argüelles, ASC, AEC

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Fernando Argüelles, ASC AEC, embarked on his cinematic journey in Madrid, Spain, delving into the intricacies of visual storytelling at Complutense University and further honing his craft at the American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts in Cinematography. A distinguished member of the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) and the Spanish Society of Cinematographers (AEC), Argüelles also holds affiliations with the International Cinematographers Guild, the Television Academy, and the Society of Camera Operators (SOC), among others.



With a diverse portfolio spanning acclaimed television series and films, including **Swamp Thing**, **Hemlock Grove**, **Fear The Walking Dead**, and **The Princess Switch**, Argüelles has consistently showcased his mastery of visual storytelling and cinematographic excellence. Beyond his contributions to the industry, Argüelles is committed to sharing his expertise through teaching engagements, webinars, and master classes.

Idit Dvir

Idit Dvir earned her MFA in Cinematography at the AFI (American Film Institute) in Los Angeles, where she was the recipient of the 2005 Hollywood Foreign Press Association Scholarship. She interned under Kramer Morgenthau ASC on the blockbuster Fracture and shot Disfigured for writer/director Glenn Gers. She returned to the AFI to teach the second-year Cinematography Fellows during the 2011-12 academic year. Idit is an Associate Professor at Howard University (Washington, D.C.), where she has taught filmmaking since 2007.



Alicia Robbins

is a director of photography known for the reboot of **Quantum Leap**, as well as **Grey's Anatomy**, the Netflix miniseries **Keep Breathing**, and the highly anticipated Season 3 of **Bridgerton**. Alicia is a graduate of the American Film Institute and also a former recipient of the Emerging Cinematographer Award.



Alan Caso, ASC



Alan Caso, ASC, learned the basic principles of light, color and composition from his father who was a photographer for the United States Air Force, a graphic artist and lithographer. Alan studied painting at Massachusetts College of Art and transferred to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, when his interest shifted to film. After graduation, he moved to Los Angeles and found a niche in the industry as a gaffer during the mid-to-late 1970s. He switched over permanently to camera operating in the late 1970s – early 1980s while additionally mastering the Steadicam, becoming one of the few operators in the 80s who performed both A-camera and Steadicam.

Caso's first feature working as an operator was on the infamous film, **Roar**. His first DP credit was **84 Charlie MoPic**, shot in 1988. He has subsequently compiled over 75 narrative credits for cinema and television screens. He won the ASC Award in 1997 for the miniseries, **George Wallace**, as well as an Emmy nomination. His cinema credits range from **Muppet** movies to John Frankenheimer's stark drama, **Reindeer Games**. Caso created a unique look on HBO with **Six Feet Under**, for which he received two more Emmy nominations, in 2002 and 2003. Other nominations were an ASC nod for his work on **Frankenstein** in 2003 and on Stephen Spielberg's **Into the West** in 2004, which also garnered him another Emmy nomination. He has continued to work for Showtime, HBO, FX, and USA, as well as projects such as **Heroes Reborn** for NBC, **Hawaii Five-0** and **American Gothic** for CBS, and **Paradise Lost** for Paramount. Most recently, he shot and directed second unit for The **Panhandle** and **Clean Slate** in Savannah, GA, in 2022/2023, where he currently teaches at The Savannah College of Art and Design.

Congratulations to

SUSAN LEWIS

of Lewis Communications

FOR BEING THE RECIPIENT OF THE 2024 WOMEN IN MEDIA ICON AWARD

From Your Friends and Family



Ana M. Amortegui, ADFC

Ana M. Amortegui, ADFC is a Colombian-born director of photography for Quantum Leap. Amortegui's cinematography can be seen on **Resident Alien**, **Black Lightning**, **Twenties**, and feature documentaries such as **Heal**, **Imagining Zootopia**, as well as commercials for Disney and the United Nations.

Anna obtained a degree in electrical engineering while working as a professional dancer. She graduated from The Art Institute of California and participated in Film Independent's prestigious Project: Involve. Additionally, Anna earned scholarships from Panavision and Arri to study Cinematography at the Maine Media Workshops, and appeared on ICG Magazine's Generation Next list in 2020.



Dave Chameides, SOC

Dave Chameides is an A camera/Steadicam operator with 35 years behind him. Working mostly in features and TV, he is known for his camera operating on **Ozark**, **Snowfall**, **Wedding Crashers**, and **P-Valley**. In his off time, he runs The Op (www.theop.io), a website and podcast he created to help younger operators learn from veterans throughout the industry. Dave is excited to be included in the awards jury and excited that so many new and exciting opportunities are out there for younger operators.

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Michelle Crenshaw

Fearless Behind the Lens and In Life

WiM member Tara Jenkins chats with cinematographer Michelle Crenshaw about life and cinematography.

Tara is a freelance cinematographer and Local 600 AC with her MFA from USC in Film Production. She is a writer and content creator at American Cinematographer and the ASC.

Michelle Crenshaw has honed her craft for several decades, mastering all facets of the camera department. She cut her teeth in Chicago as a camera assistant on many films, including John Hughes' **Uncle Buck** and **Home Alone 1** and **2**. Her work as a camera operator can be seen on shows such as **The Ranch**, **Bob Hearts Abishola**, **Grey's Anatomy**, and **The Thundermans Return**. As a cinematographer, she has lensed films such as **As Evil Does** and **The Watermelon Woman**, which was added to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry in 2021.

Crenshaw is a proud member of IATSE and staunch union supporter. She is a national executive board member for ICG Local 600. Crenshaw has prioritized giving back to her community. She was honored at the 5th Annual Women in Media Holiday Toast for her prolific career, and was an integral part of the Women In Media New Tech Initiative.



Why did you choose to pursue a career in the camera department?

The immediacy of picking up my first stills camera at sixteen years old was pivotal. Especially as an African American woman, having our voices heard or seen was just non-existent at the time. Being able to capture an image in just a fraction of a second meant something to me.

When I was in my late teens, living in Detroit, I worked for about 6 months for Photo Corporation of America. Our job was to drive around to discount stores and set up a photo booth for family photographs. That was fun because it got me to travel and integrate with other employees who were doing the same thing at nearby department stores. That short yet formative experience motivated me to go back to school. I thought I should at least have a bachelor's degree and have something more sustainable. That job had introduced me to the world outside of my thirty mile radius, and I wanted to experience more of life.

You went back to school. Is that when you moved from stills into film work?

I was a little older when I went to film school. I knew I wanted to be able to express myself in some way artistically, but I also knew the realities of coming from a working class environment. When I graduated high school at seventeen, I was working and taking general classes at community college. It was ingrained in me to care for myself and have a living wage.

Even as a teen, I was reading photography trade magazines. I saw an ad for this school that doesn't exist anymore, Ray Vogue School of Design in Chicago. By the time I was 21, I was able to save enough money to move to Chicago to go to Ray Vogue. They focused on a lot of technical arts. I got excited thinking about large format photography, 4 by 5, and later 8 by 10. You would set up still lifes and shoot them. It was a two year certificate program, and once completed they placed you with work, which was appealing

I was always really engaged in the technical as well as the creative aspects of image making. I wanted to link the two together. In the mid-eighties, everything was analog. I loved working with the equipment to the point that I was pulling cameras apart and putting them back together.



Photo by: Claudia Hoag

After my formative experiences at Ray Vogue, I knew that I wanted something more. At the dorm where I was staying, one of the tenants mentioned Columbia College, also in Chicago. To this day, it continues to have a huge photo department and a film department. When she said film, I was like, 'Oh, wow'!

I ended up transferring to Columbia College and getting my BA in film. I immersed myself in the film community at the college and the greater Chicago area. I worked in the film cage supplying gear to other students. I shot a lot of projects there and was a TA as well.

The aspect of taking a still frame to build on and tell a story attracted me initially. The transition to the moving image came once I did my first film project, working with a Bolex camera, turning the turret from wide to medium to telephoto, and doing a series of composed shots to show emotion or thought. I was hooked on cinematography. Even though in hindsight I was very naive about my place in the world, I found my passion.

While I was at Columbia college, I supported myself by being a projectionist for Facets Multimedia, which was an arthouse cinema. I got to see different non-American films to learn my aesthetic outside of the American gaze. I saw more European films, films from South Africa, France, Italy. I really started to develop another aesthetic as far as the visual composition of storytelling.

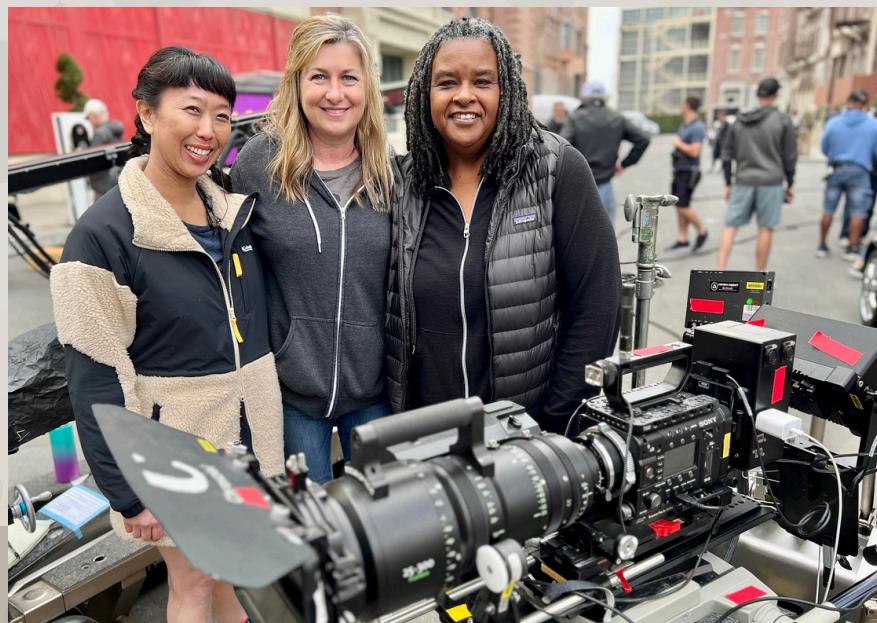
How did you get your start after film school?

When I graduated, Chicago was getting busy. I was in the generation right after **The Blues Brothers** film, which blew up production. Before I got out of school I was doing a lot of little no budget independent projects with the community. I would really have to hustle to get paid on non-union projects. One of my instructors said that I should consider joining the union. Coming from a labor town like Detroit, and having two parents who were involved in the labor movement, I was very aware of the protections that you had as a collective bargaining group to get paid. The thought of being able to join a union was just part of my DNA. Like my mom says, luck is when preparation and opportunity meet.

With the etiquette and other great lessons that I learned on union sets, I became a rising star very quickly. The work was coming in, and I was steadily employed between John Hughes' **Home Alone 1 and 2** and Oprah's made for television productions. John recognized that I was one of the few black women who was engaged in the process and doing the work. It was a blessing. I was able to work on six films with him, starting with **Uncle Buck**. I worked my way up from film loader to a second assistant to a camera technician on his films.

What prompted you to make the move from Chicago to LA?

I like being out of my comfort zone with people I otherwise might not get to meet. I also like being exposed to environments different from my own. I felt that I had outgrown Chicago, as I was working on my last John Hughes film, **Dennis the Menace**. In 1993, I got a call from Michelle Parkerson to DP her AFI Directing Workshop for Women Project, **Odds and Ends** in LA. I jumped at the chance. I'm glad that I took that leap of faith in myself, because it's now in the Criterion Collection.





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Even though I wanted to be a cinematographer, it was quite clear that the social issues that we are still dealing with today, sexism and racism, were there. I enjoyed being part of the process of telling stories, and I was building skill and language, however it was still a long road to becoming a Cinematographer. Some people just have a hard time seeing women being department heads and making cinematic creative decisions. Despite this, I have moved forward and carved a space for myself.

What were those early days in the entertainment industry like for you?

When I started my journey, just getting in the room was my first battle. Once I was able to get into the space and make a consistent living, regardless of where I was in the camera department, I was very happy to contribute what I could to the process of storytelling.

Even though I wanted to be a cinematographer, it was quite clear that the social issues that we are still dealing with today, sexism and racism, were there. I enjoyed being part of the process of telling stories, and I was building skill and language, however it was still a long road to becoming a Cinematographer. Some people just have a hard time seeing women being department heads and making cinematic creative decisions. Despite this, I have moved forward and carved a space for myself.

What are some of your favorite projects from the length of your career?

One of my first big features in Chicago was The **Untouchables**. I came in as a day player and ended up working for a month. That was a big deal to me. Sean Connery and Kevin Costner starred in it, Brian Da Palma was the director, and Stephen Burum, ASC was the DP. I felt like I made it! I got to fly over to Montana on a private jet with the crew to do the bootlegging scenes. Being with the crew, managing film as the Loader was a huge experience for me that I'll never forget.

Even the independent films I worked on once I moved from Chicago to LA taught me a lot. My first feature in LA was this non-union film where I met Johnny Simmons, ASC called **Out-of-Sync**. He was the camera operator and I was the first assistant. I got to meet a whole new group of artists. Debbie Allen was the Director, Isidore Mankofsky, ASC was the DP.

For the series **Attila the Hun**, I was the key camera technician. Along with my second assistant we managed cameras, lenses, and built out the camera truck. I was in Lithuania for three months managing six cameras, working around horses, with a DP I had never collaborated with before. I was working under Steven Fierberg, ASC in a country where I didn't speak the language. I accepted the challenge of learning the metric system to pull focus. It gave me another perspective on how people live.

How have things changed since you started out?

My style didn't change, despite the change in technology. The photographic medium changed based on reflective light values. Language changed when we moved from analog (film) to digital (sensor size). Lighting instruments changed as well. Incandescent lights were quite bulky compared to LED lights. Being able to change color without gels has been a cost effective and time efficient way to be more creative.

You've worked your way up in the camera department. How has that informed your work as a DP?



As you become more experienced on set, you learn other department's processes. It helps you plan better. You know how much time things take, and you can collaborate better with other departments. You get efficient balancing time management, production needs, and director's vision.

What is your advice for women, especially people of color pursuing cinematography?

Trust your instincts. If you are passionate about something, just keep working at it. There is a community out there that will embrace you. We are all providing a service. The more you actually do the work, the more you can present yourself to others.

Tell me about how you met director Cheryl Dunye and your involvement on the classic film, *The Watermelon Woman*.

I met Cheryl Dunye because of my relationship with audience building in Chicago. I was very involved in an organization called Women in the Director's Chair. Cheryl came to our festivals, with her autobiographical films. She heard about me, and we connected over the black queer experience. We knew that we wanted to work together, it was just a question of when and where. By the time I had the opportunity to shoot **The Watermelon Woman**, it was several years later. I was starting to build a reputation in LA. By the mid 90's I had worked my first season on **NYPD Blue** as a focus puller. That summer, she got her first-in money from an NEA grant. I went to Philly to lens **The Watermelon Woman**.



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There was a script, but there was also a John Cassavetes type of improvisation with family and friends that made the film unique. It did well outside of the country at the time. It didn't do well in the US until it got renewed interest as the first African American Lesbian film. It was so controversial that the NEA wanted to take the grant away because of the queer content. I'm honored to be part of an historic film.

It was a short turn around. I was there for about three weeks, even including prep. We were able to create a visual language by embracing the financial constraints. We shot on 16 millimeter for the bulk of the story and VHS for the documentary interviews. I learned a lot about lighting and being flexible on that shoot. We could only shoot the video store after closing, and made it feel like daytime. Because we had prepped the location, we were able to match it to real daylight. When we did the martini shot of Cheryl walking into the video store at the end of our shoot night, it matched perfectly.



Is there anything else about your career, your ethos as a DP, that you want to share with the WIM community?

You need to have a certain amount of tenacity and forthrightness. You really need to know who you are as a person. At this point in my career, I'm at a stage where I'm looking to give back and share my experience. There has been a huge influx of women in the industry over the last ten years, largely due to digital filmmaking and unscripted t.v. shows. The digital domain has democratized the ability for more people to tell their stories. Folks just starting out need to be involved in various film and entertainment communities like Women In Media or Film Independent and many others. That's where they can grow, evolve, and network.

I'm grateful for WIM. We need to have someone like founder and executive director Tema Staig to champion us as women, no matter the department, and help us find the tools to grow. WiM is the connective tissue between the crafts. In all departments, there are so many ways for women to make a very good living on your way up to becoming a department head, if that is what you want. Whether you become a director or a producer, you need to understand production and what the crew does on set, in prep, through to post production. The same goes for all department heads.

You have to evolve constantly and stay humble enough to know that you don't know everything. Even after decades of working, you have to keep up to date. When you're waiting around for the phone to ring, you need to keep learning and moving forward. Because of life's struggles and frustration, it's easy to consider giving up. That's when the phone call happens.

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Jendra Jarnagin

An Altitude Award Winner Reaching New Heights

WiM member Tara Jenkins chats with 2022 Altitude Award Winner Jendra Jarnagin about life and cinematography.

Tara is a freelance cinematographer and Local 600 AC with her MFA from USC in Film Production. She is a writer and content creator at American Cinematographer and the ASC.

Jendra Jarnagin has lensed everything from independent features to prime-time television, with numerous shorts, web series, and commercial shoots along the way. Her thirty year journey to reach her goal of shooting episodic TV has culminated in her recent work on *East New York* and the upcoming season four of **Emily In Paris**. Jarnagin won second place at the 2022 Altitude Awards.

Jarnagin's work as a gaffer and electrician can be seen on shows such as **Sex & The City** and **Law & Order**. As a cinematographer, some of her credits include the features **Entangled**, **The Sixth Reel**, and **Asking For It**, which premiered at Tribeca and was released theatrically by Paramount. She has shot ad campaigns for Maybelline, Estee Lauder, Pureology, Adidas, Canon, and Lincoln.

What was it like winning your Altitude Award?

I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how competitive it would be or where I stood in comparison to other candidates. I was very excited to be chosen. The prizes are phenomenal, the industry support you get through participating is really great. It's a fantastic platform for exposure.

I saw the showreels of several of the other DPs who had entered the Altitudes competition at the Women in Media booth at Cinegear and thought 'wow'. People who I didn't know, or only knew socially but hadn't seen their work before, I got to see their work. Certain people's work who I really responded to, I was able to seek out and get to know them better. I've recommended them for jobs after seeing their work through that platform. The competition is a remarkable avenue for participants to gain exposure.



What was the most meaningful moment for you during the Altitude Awards ceremony?

Part of being selected for the awards included getting a quote about your work from the judges. What Alan Caso, ASC had to say about me blew me away. *"I think that Jendra Jarnagin is a highly developed Cinematographer who should be shooting top end Films and Television. She possesses all the attributes and talent to handle so many different looks. The question is not whether she should be shooting big shows, or why she hasn't been shooting them - the question is when! I believe it is now without question."*

The prizes were great, and winning was great, but really that quote from someone of Alan's esteem meant the most to me. That quote gave me a lot of confidence going into my TV series interviews that I had that same week. At the time I had yet to land my own major TV show. And "from Alan's lips to God's ears" that all changed less than a week later!

Where has your career taken you since winning the Altitude Awards?

I was on a panel for the Altitude Award winners at Tiffen Tech Day and (WiM Executive Director) Tema Staig was asking each of us what our one year goal was. I made a joke that my one week goal was to DP a major TV show! I said it was a one week goal because I had interviews happening for three major TV shows in a one or two week period. One of them was **East New York**. I had the interview while I was in Los Angeles and got the good news while I was still there, even though it was shot in New York. That was the big break that I had been waiting for, a primetime CBS show for Warner Brothers, the first season. It was very exciting to finally reach that milestone of getting my first show.

East New York was a twenty-one episode show, so that was ten months of work. It ended right before the strike so I got really lucky with my timing. I had just finished such a long run of work that I wanted a multi-month break for myself, anyway. I had just worked enough to get my health insurance and finances in a spot to weather that rough patch.

Then, I did an independent film in the fall when the SAG interim agreements were being allowed. The day after the strikes were announced to be over, I was offered **Emily in Paris** for season four as an alternating DP. That was really great to have so much lead time. I was told I had the job before Thanksgiving, but I didn't start until February. It's pretty unusual to know that far in advance that you have a job. It was a lot of peace of mind and excitement.



What drew you to cinematography in the first place?

I was introduced to filmmaking through an extracurricular program in my middle school. I started exploring, getting excited and interested in that field. Learning about filmmaking and who did what, it became clear to me that I actually wanted to become a cinematographer and not a director. I found out where my talents lay, and what I was interested in was actually not the director's job. I didn't know about the cinematographer's job, until I was actually exposed to the segmentation of job duties

I went to NYU as an undergraduate. I was pretty sure that I wanted to be a DP, but I came in with the idea that I didn't really know for sure until I had the opportunity to do it hands-on. I also wanted to try my hand at directing, to make sure that my hunch was correct. Through that experience of going to NYU, it solidified that I wanted to be a cinematographer.

I graduated film school back when we only shot on film, and there was no digital. It took a really long time to get a copy of anything that you shot, so having a reel that was competitive to get you more DP jobs was a really slow process. I needed to work for a living, and continue to work for free to continue to build my DP reel, so I went the gaffer and electrician route as an employable skill that I could actually get paid for. I did that for many years until I was able to get my cinematography reel strong enough to continuously win paid work.

By then, I was an electrician in the union. I finally got to the point where I was working more and more as a cinematographer and less as an electric and was ready to take the leap to being a full time DP. I realized I needed to put my focus on developing my cinematography career, instead of just taking the jobs that came my way. I had to put effort into curating the direction of my cinematography career, and I couldn't really do that if I was working all the time with my side job. In 2005 I went full time as a DP, mostly doing independent films. I eventually got into commercials as a parallel track.

How do you feel that going the electrician and gaffer route has informed your work as a cinematographer?

Cinematography is lighting, and I think you really need to understand lighting to be a good cinematographer. I think a lot of people are intimidated by the technology, or how much they don't know in terms of leading a crew and speaking the language and having the competence, the communication and understanding of who does what. I have consistently recommended to all aspiring DPs, and especially women, to come up through the electric department.



Getting to understand lighting from the inside out, in a hands-on kind of way lets you really understand how to be efficient and work with your crews, as well as get a lot of creative ideas. Every crew you work on, every gaffer you work with, every DP you work with, every director you work with, every location is different... It all adds to your cumulative bank of ideas and experience that you can bring to your own work as a cinematographer. As a camera assistant or operator, you aren't getting the whole scope of departmental collaboration and understanding that you get working on bigger sets in the lighting department. So, to my mind, lighting is by far the best training ground for becoming a cinematographer.

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What was your journey like transitioning into television?

I tried for a really long time to get a television series, as independent films became fewer and farther between and budgets got smaller. I had already done a lot with a pretty small budget, and bigger budget independent films were so few that it was hard to move my career forward. I started to set my sights on episodic television. That was a very hard nut to crack. In the television world, no one wants to give you your first TV show. Most DPs who got their big break in TV, come in through the operator position on a show where they were already operating.

With this knowledge in mind, I wondered if I needed to go the camera operator route. I already had a solid independent film career going as a cinematographer. It felt like a big sidestep to let go of the momentum I had in the independent world to operate on something full time, long term, with the hope that the show will actually get renewed and I will get bumped up to cinematographer.

It seemed like a very big commitment for a small likelihood of a payoff. So, I never chose to go that direction. But, it took me way longer than I thought it would. It probably took eight years of focused efforts to try and get a TV show. I was interviewing for TV pretty consistently, making it to the top two or three candidates for several well-known shows for about three years in a row. I would make it to the final rounds and get really close over and over again. I talked to a bunch of my TV colleagues who encouraged me by saying that it might not look like you have much to show for it, but it's a step in the process of getting there. You just keep doing that until one of them picks you. It finally happened for me like two days after I won the Altitude Award.

The process to get where you want to be as a cinematographer can take such a long time. Do you have any words of advice for people earlier on in their journey?

You need to be really committed to it and be in it for the long haul. You have to know you might not ever hit it big. Can you be satisfied with what your life is like in the present while you are on that road? It's the whole thing about life being about the journey and not about the destination. I had a lot of ups and downs and there were several years, especially as I was getting older, where I kept feeling like I hadn't 'made it' and the older I got the more it looked like that may never happen. I had to ask if I was ok with this being what my life is, what my career is. I had to make peace with that while still having ambitions to grow and strive to succeed at an even higher level.

Here is a bit of practical advice I don't hear spoken enough about: as a freelancer, I think it's really important to live beneath your means financially. We're going to have ebbs and flows in our work, even when it isn't as dire as it is on an industry - wide level right now. People get into the trap when they are working a lot and making a lot of money that they think they've made it and they're set. They get themselves into a high overhead situation. I think it's far wiser for your long - term career health to put the majority of your paycheck into savings in order to cushion the times that you're not making that money. That then empowers you to make decisions in your career that are not completely based on finances.



Photo by: Ridikul fg

I've shot independent films where I've hardly made any money. I've done freebie shorts or spec commercials that I chose to do because of the artistic opportunity. You can't invest in yourself in that way if you don't have the savings to cover you and allow for things like that. Those are the choices that we really need to be able to make to get our career in the direction that we want it to go, rather than being at the mercy of whatever comes up or will make you enough money to survive.

Your growth as a filmmaker is like the analogy of the iceberg: you only see the tip, but everything that is underneath the water you had to build for your own personal journey and struggle. No one sees that but there is so much personal development, coaching, therapy, finding your own support structures and fumbling about in the dark to figure out what works for you: self-care, balance, curating community... All these things in the personal growth side of things don't get talked about enough. People with normal jobs have supervisors and get quarterly or annual reviews. They get feedback about how they are doing, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. They get opportunities for leadership training. We need to seek all of that out for ourselves.

Leadership, communication, confidence, your voice as an artist— all of these soft skills are a huge part of what I see as the difference between the people who succeed at the highest levels and the people who are struggling. I feel like I got my hard skills, my lighting knowledge, my camera know-how, in a solid place a long time ago. I felt I could compare myself and say that I was at the top of my field with that knowledge in those areas for the last fifteen years. So then, what can I keep developing to become a better cinematographer?



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What was your journey like transitioning into television?

Perseverance was the key to my personal success. It took me thirty years. I didn't get my big break until I was 48. I wouldn't have gotten it if I had given up, but there are no guarantees that you will get it. You have to create a life for yourself that you personally are satisfied with and forge a path to get to create the kind of work that you can be proud of, even when it's small. All of us, as ambitious freelancers, are always wanting something bigger, but so much of that is out of your control. What can you do with your own work and for your own satisfaction? It's a big question that takes a lot of personal growth and self development. In order to not give up and make it through all the ups and downs, you have to cultivate a strong belief in yourself, and a great support system through friends, mentors and community. And you also have to really be in love with the process and not just the results.



Rachel Joy Victor

A.I., Emerging Technologies, and a Look Into The Future Laura Pursley

[Interview by Women in Media Executive Member Laura Pursley, a marketing specialist for emerging media technologies and Global Marketing Director at TVU Networks.]

Weaving the Fabric of Storytelling's Future

Rachel Joy Victor is the co-founder of FBRC.AI, a company focused on creating AI-supported tools for the future of content production--from films to games to location-based experiences. Rachel's work as a designer, strategist, and worldbuilder for emerging technologies (XR/AI/web3) focuses on creating cohesive narrative, brand, and product experiences. She designs multiplatform narratives and gaming experiences, tools and platforms, spaces and cities. Her clients have included Disney, HBO, Technicolor, Vans, Ford, Nike, Havas, Meow Wolf, Niantic, JPL, and many more.

Laura: The term “worldbuilder” is interesting to me, because I know it's meant to signify someone who uses cutting-edge tech to create visual stories that may be experienced on multiple platforms – and yet it also makes me think of past show creators who conceptualized unique environments and rules for the characters to experience plot. Gene Roddenberry (**Star Trek**) and JJ Abrams (**Lost**) come to mind. What does “worldbuilder” mean to you?

Rachel: Gene Roddenberry and JJ Abrams brought a lot of worldbuilding into those examples, yes, and from another angle, so do franchise leads like Kevin Feige (MCU producer) and Kathleen Kennedy (**Star Wars** producer). Look at how George Miller has expanded the **Mad Max** world in recent films with built out subcultures having extensive narrative and visual lore behind each of them.

At its most fundamental, worldbuilding is about understanding there is a complex world that stories spawn out of, and designing from the world outwards. Worldbuilding doesn't need to happen all at once or just through one person—I think the best worldbuilding projects are flexible enough to grow over time and take in a diversity of viewpoints.

The definition of worldbuilding that I use to describe my work more closely aligns to certain production designers. One example is Alex McDowell, who was brought in early to work with scientists and technologists to shape the rules of the future world in which the movie **Minority Report** took place. Alex and his team conceptualized that characters might be able to drive vertically, and then the vertical aspect of the world added complexity to a chase sequence in the film.

When I think of worldbuilding, I typically think of multiple layers of design and production:

Production

- **Volumetric World Design:** This aspect explores translating the spatial design from maps to 3D architecture—ideally in game engine, so the designed world can then support production needs across formats (virtual production, gaming, location-based entertainment, etc.).
- **Narrative Design:** The specifics of how the world shows up in each of these formats is different—narrative design shapes how the world can add richness to each format and influence the experience of the viewer/player/user. For example, in films, the world exists through production design, but also through the behavioral scripts of characters. Narrative design is understanding the affordances of each medium, and shaping the way that narrative and world intertwine through each.
- **Data Systems Design:** If you want to design worlds that change over time and can respond to input, they have to have a data logic behind how they operate. That's both the logic of how entities in the world can evolve, and the logic of how individuals change as they interact with the world.
- **Transmedia Strategy:** Now that you have a world that can support interaction and production across formats, you need to understand how it plays out across mediums. What is the logic behind which stories in the world play out in a game versus which play out in the story? How do you think about which fans are watching what and how to build collective understanding of the story over time? How much are people willing to pay to access story in each of these formats? All of those things are part of transmedia strategy.



Design

- The systems design of the world: This is about understanding how the economy, government, culture, etc. all operate within the context of either the real world, or the fictional world that we are designing.
- The story of the world: This is where the systems design is played out in a more temporal way—when we understand the characters and lore that have shaped the world over time.
- The spatial design of the world: The stories that have taken place in the world over time can only be fully grounded when we understand how they play out over the physical geography of the world.

Laura: How do your projects for clients in aerospace/architecture/tradeshows apply to filmmaking?

Rachel: Depending on the context in which you apply worldbuilding, its focus can look a little different. The breakdown above is focused on applying worldbuilding towards narrative ends, but it can also apply towards other disciplines.

When you think about architecture and urban design, for instance: master planners want to know that the buildings they design are future-proofed. So understanding the systems of the world and how they are evolving – as well as how behavior plays out across space is important for them. In addition, their world is also becoming more intertwined with volumetric and data representations, either at the point of production (CAD, Houdini, Rhino, etc.) or the point of implementation (digital twins, edge computing, spatial computing, etc.). So a lot of the skills that are used for worldbuilding for narrative ends are useful for these worlds – albeit translated through a more functional lens.

Laura: That must be so engaging to work across multiple disciplines! How did you get started in this work?



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I was really lucky to have done both of these degrees at USC, which has a strong media research focus. I joined a bunch of these labs and worked on projects related to storytelling in immersive media, transmedia strategy, and worldbuilding – which set me up to do what I'm doing today!

Rachel: When I graduated high school, I had actually applied to film schools. I got into a couple of programs but realized that I wasn't as interested in learning production as I was in understanding how we relate to stories – especially in the context of technology. That shaped my educational journey: I got a B.S. in Computational Neuroscience (to understand AI/robotics, but also the human experience of technology) and an M.S. in Spatial Economics and Data Analysis (to better support the spatial data side of worldbuilding).

Laura: Tell us about the founding of FBRC.ai.

Rachel: When I graduated high school, I had actually applied to film schools. I got into a couple of programs but realized that I wasn't as interested in learning production as I was in understanding how we relate to stories – especially in the context of technology. That shaped my educational journey: I got a B.S. in Computational Neuroscience (to understand AI/robotics, but also the human experience of technology) and an M.S. in Spatial Economics and Data Analysis (to better support the spatial data side of worldbuilding).

AI and data had always been a part of my work in some way, and I had been tracking how it was evolving. Around 2022, it finally felt like it reached a point where it could be operationalized really well to support the creative process. (When I talk about AI, I should clarify that AI is a really broad area. Only a small part of what I'm interested in is related to generative AI. Machine learning and procedural AI have also expanded as well in order to become great support tools for creators).



Rachel: I wanted to shape AI in a way that supported creators, especially in this formative time for the industry. I had supported AI LA, a nonprofit founded by my friend, Todd Terrazas, for a number of years, and we decided to join forces. Todd had been creating education around AI in this space for 8 years, building up a 15,000+ member community – and now wanted to see how to use that platform to support the M&E and creator community. We also partnered with our friend Eric Wilker, who came up in production and worked at Warner Brothers and Amazon for nearly 20 years, to bring a studio perspective into our work.

Laura: recently realized your company's name is pronounced "Fabric", and I appreciate the imagery that conveys. What is the FBRC team working on currently?

Rachel: Because of our deep knowledge of AI and film and content production, we're able to have a really targeted understanding of how this space will evolve. We support startups that are building AI tools for film/media production through our cohort and broader network – offering them product and positioning advice, and connecting them with partnerships and opportunities to scale. We also consult with studios and production companies that are trying to better understand the role of AI in production workflows. We bring it all together with a focus on events that educate creators on where AI will intersect with their work. Most recently, we produced the 800+ person AI on the Lot conference that had a whole day of programming around AI's evolving role in entertainment.



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Laura: AI on the Lot was a stimulating conference! Something I observe about AI events is that they attract a diverse set of participants. The relative newness of AI compared to filmmaking in general suggests there are fewer legacy barriers for underrepresented groups to hurdle. And also, as much as AI has the potential to shape how we make movies, its transformative allure extends to so much beyond the filmmaking world. What do you recommend for Women in Media members wanting to explore AI in filmmaking and other visual realms?

Rachel: For understanding generative AI specifically, I always say that it helps to start with the surface level things and then go one level deeper.

So obviously, start with Open AI's ChatGPT and Midjourney and Runway to learn what those tools can generate. But then use Open AI's Playground to understand better what the parameters of the model are, and how its logic is shaped. Or use ComfyUI to explore what control looks like with visual models. Going one level deeper helps you understand why the output from generative models looks the way it does—which helps you understand its constraints in a tangible way.

Beyond that, it also helps to understand at least a little bit of the logic of the technology—again to understand its constraints and where it's going. But also use LinkedIn and Twitter to follow creators in the space like Dave Clark or Jon Finger, who are using the tools and constantly pushing the limits of what AI can do.

Laura: Thank you for sharing your insights.
What are you watching these days?

Rachel: Quick hits recently: love the philosophical commentary about gaming and architecture by Jacob Geller on YouTube, have been really enjoying the headdresses and costuming in *Bridgerton*, and really appreciated the combination of political commentary and action in *Monkey Man*!



Eszter Csepeli, HCA

Going The Distance with the 2022 Altitude Award Winner

WiM member Tara Jenkins chats with cinematographer Eszter Csepeli, HCA about her international career as a cinematographer.

Tara is a freelance cinematographer and Local 600 AC with her MFA from USC in Film Production. She is a writer and content creator at American Cinematographer and the ASC.

Eszter Csepeli, HCA won the top honor at the Women in Media Altitude Awards in 2022. She began her career as a cinematographer in Budapest, Hungary, before moving to Los Angeles. She has lensed films such as **The Execution**, which was nominated for a Palm d'Or at Cannes, and the upcoming **Quarter**, starring Brooke Shields. Alongside shooting, she has taught cinematography at LMU under a Fulbright Scholarship. Csepeli is one of the founding members of the Hungarian Cinematographers' Association.



Photo by: Nóra Bereczki

What inspired you to pursue cinematography? What has that journey been like?

I was drawn to being a cinematographer. It wasn't a conscious choice. I started out, like a lot of people, doing black and white photography in my high school years. I just really enjoyed the laboratory work. I liked developing my photos, and later on I realized it had been really good training for me to learn lighting through that medium.

Photo by: Kelsey Basecom



I didn't touch a cinema camera until I was applying for film school, which I did very late – I was 25 years old. Before that, I had gone to law school because of family pressure. I went to film school in Budapest at the Hungarian University of Theatre and Film. It was a very competitive school with a very small cohort of cinematographers, something like eight people. It was a dream come true to be accepted. I was there for five years, which is very long, but it gave me a very extensive study in cinematography.

Getting out of film school in Hungary was a very frightening thing for me. I realize now that it is daunting in the US as well. When I was teaching at LMU in 2021 and 2022 as a Fulbright scholar, I had many graduate cinematography students who felt the same way. That's when I realized that what I felt coming out of film school was completely normal. You are in a bubble for a couple of years, making your projects, and you're in a place where it's good to experiment. You should make a lot of mistakes in order to learn from them. But, then, suddenly you are out in the world and you need to show the industry what you've got.

In Hungary, filmmaking wasn't an open environment for women at all. I didn't fully realize this until I graduated, and I tried to break into the film business in Hungary. There were no female camera operators. The last woman who shot a feature film as a cinematographer was in 2001, so 11 years before I graduated! Looking around in this environment, I was thinking — How am I going to make it? I started reading articles online, through Indiewire and similar outlets, and that's when the voices started really reaching me from the US. Rachel Morrison, ASC and Reed Morano, ASC and all these other female DPs were talking about the importance of having female cinematographers behind the camera.

This gave me the idea that maybe I should pursue my career in the US instead of fighting against the odds in Hungary. It is really hard to change the mentality of the people in the industry. Why should I fight there? Maybe it isn't easier in the US, but back then I thought it would be less difficult to come here and start something. I felt like I was more welcome than in my own country. So that started the process of moving to Los Angeles.



Photo by: Ridikul fg

What was the process of moving your career to Los Angeles like?

I was lucky to work with great directors, even during my student years. One of the films I shot, called **The Execution**, got into Cannes in 2014. That really started my career in the US. I applied for an artist visa and started doing short films here. Then, the pandemic hit and I applied and won a Fulbright scholarship. It was great teaching young cinematographers. It's wonderful to teach because you always learn something yourself. It's one thing to do something for a long time, and another to talk about it. It was great reinforcement of the craft for me as well.

While working at LMU, I wanted to find out why things were much better in the film industry in the US versus Eastern Europe, and to find a community here. One of the organizations I found was Women In Media. During that same time, I was lucky to get signed by a commercial agent at CAA. Then, thanks to Women In Media, because I got on the crew list, a group of people found me for a feature film in the US called Quarter.

Photo by: Kárász Karolina



Basically, I hope this is really going to start my career here in the US on the narrative side. During the strike, I made a Hungarian feature film, which also just finished. It's exciting – two of my films are coming out in late 2024.



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Altitude Awards 24' 

You were a founding member of the Hungarian Cinematographers' Association (HCA). Please speak about that.

I was the only female founding member. There were forty men. I was able to bring in two more female cinematographers later on and every time I talk to people, I am always referring them to female cinematographers. I have my own little fight and am trying to change the system from the inside out. But, overall, the tides are changing. Hungary is a hub for international productions. **Dune 2, Poor Things**, lots of things are happening right now in Hungary. Because of that, people have been coming in internationally and asking for female operators.

This is how I got onto the series **Jack Ryan**, actually, because cinematographer Richard Rutkowski was looking for a female operator. I am one of the first female operators in Hungary that has been working on international productions. The industry is changing slowly, and I am very happy that I can be a part of the change.



I would love to talk about you winning the Altitude Award two years ago.

I really enjoyed getting a sense of community from the awards. I'm still in touch with the other winners and people from Women In Media that I met through that experience. That's a great thing – especially in harder times, when you can all get together and talk. It's tough to be a female cinematographer, even in the US, and it's good to have people to speak with about that. Being there was a win in itself. Winning was so out of the blue for me, but was such a fantastic experience as well.



Where do you see your career headed in the next five years?

After the Altitude Awards, I got into the ASC Vision Mentorship program. My mentor was Cynthia Pushek, ASC. That was certainly another step forward in my career. Since then, we finished shooting **Quarter** and I have also done some other short films.

In five years, I would love to be a well established DP with more narrative films on my resume. I would also really like to get more into the commercial world, in order to give myself the freedom to choose my narrative work more freely. I want to be balanced in my career.



What advice to young DPs, particularly women, would you give?

Look for mentors. That's what I was lacking, obviously, because there weren't many women around me. I think it's really important to talk to established female cinematographers, not just for technical advice, but just for mental support. To learn about the path and what is ahead of you. I think that's very important and is what I would recommend first. It can be a game changer.

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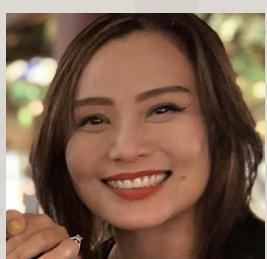
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